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Psalm 97

Acts 16:16-34

THE NEED TO BE FREED

“Hey, Silas and Paul. I haven’t seen you since yesterday. What’s been going on?”

“Oh, not that much. There was an exorcism we conducted which led to a mob scene and a kangaroo court, after which we got flogged and imprisoned. Then we had a midnight worship service right there in our cell. There was an earthquake that broke up the jail, but it didn’t lead to a jail break. We kept someone from committing suicide, someone who then had an altar call experience without the altar. We stayed up talking about Jesus with the man’s whole household. They tended to our wounds from being flogged and then everyone got baptized right there in the middle of the night. After that we had a celebratory feast. With there having been so little going on, I can’t figure out why we’re feeling a little bit tired.”

Do you think the author of the Book of Acts wanted to make it clear that the Holy Spirit was active addressing various needs? This account, shared with help from our children’s drama group, shows deep contrasts between those who are free and those who are not. It would seem that the epitome of the lack of freedom is being locked in stocks inside a jail cell after having been flogged, all for doing a good deed. That’s the condition in which Paul and Silas found themselves. And yet, their external situation indicating a total lack of freedom does not shape their internal situation. Their experience goes far beyond the children’s book that described a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. There they are in stocks in their jail cell at midnight – a situation where it seemingly couldn’t get any darker - and what are they doing? They are praying and singing hymns to God. Externally, they lacked freedom, but their spirits were in no way bound. They had not given up on God and they had confidence that God hadn’t given up on them. So, they are praying and singing hymns in the middle of the night.

Don’t you wonder what they were praying for? Had it been me, I would have been praying for deliverance and for relief from the injuries from being beaten. And there would be nothing wrong with that. However, it might have been that Paul and

Silas were praying for the slave girl they had encountered earlier in the day. She could not get free from a spirit that enabled her to tell the unknown. She was held in slavery because of that ability. But Paul, appealing to the power of Christ, called that spirit out of her. We would join with Silas and Paul in the hope that the girl would no longer be held as a slave since she had lost the ability to make money for her owners. Perhaps the prison prayers were lifting up the people who had claimed to own the girl, asking that they be delivered from their great greed that valued money over the wellbeing of vulnerable people. This group had used the power of intolerance of geographical and religious ‘outsiders’ to rile up everyone else against Paul and Silas, so they might also have prayed for them to be freed from the captivity of prejudice and a conniving willingness to use hatred as a tool to get what they wanted. The midnight prayers could also have been on behalf of the magistrates who were willing to beat and imprison innocent people. Perhaps it was fear of the slave holders from which the magistrates needed to be delivered, so that they could rightly carry out their judicial duties. I wouldn’t doubt that the imprisoned duo also prayed for the jailer who had locked them up, recognizing that he did not feel free to do what was right, being required to put people in jail who had done nothing wrong. Paul and Silas are locked in stocks inside a prison cell. And yet their prayers and the fact that they were singing hymns indicate that they were freer than anyone else in the entire account.

The God who had delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt wasn’t going to have much problem with a jail cell in Philippi. An earthquake shook open the doors and split the chains. The jailer was so bound by fear of what would happen to him for a situation way beyond his control that he was ready to kill himself. But Silas and Paul assured him that they and the others had not taken the opportunity to escape. I don’t know if it was the wonder of the liberating earthquake or the compassion that the jailer saw from his liberated captives that made him desire the freedom they knew in their relationship with God. But it was something that he and his whole household recognized that brought new freedom to their lives that night, a night that was transformed into one of compassion, hospitality, and new-found faith.

Now I have to imagine that it is unlikely that you or I are going to run into a slave girl later today, or that we will be beaten in response for liberating a girl from an oppressive situation, or that we will get put in jail for doing what is right, or that we

will get freed from jail by an earthquake, or that we will save the life of someone about to kill himself and instead end up baptizing him and his family. So, is this just an adventurous story of an amazing, enthralling, no joke, very incredible day and night to entertain us?

What we have here is a story that can help us recognize that the lack of freedom can take many forms and those who have not yet been liberated can take actions that wreak havoc on the lives of others. A friend of mine, a former member of a church I served, works in the Virginia Beach Municipal Building, where two days ago, twelve people were gunned down by a disgruntled employee. My friend was not in the building when the rampage took place. And yet, how I wish the shooter had been delivered from his rage and his disdain for human life before his murderous acts! In our world, sadly we hear that there is still a huge slave trade in what is now referred to as human trafficking. There are places in the world where child soldiers and child prostitutes are forced to do unspeakable things at a very young age. A great liberation is needed. We have been hearing of the huge numbers of people who struggle with some kind of addiction that has that has devastating effects on them and on their loved ones. Liberation is needed. In our society, there are all kinds of power players who disregard the wellbeing of vulnerable people, building systems of economic oppression out of a love for money. We see the power of stoking the fear of outsiders or of people of a particular religion which some hear as an invitation to mob rule. Some kind of freedom from the grip of hateful fear is needed. We ourselves may know how deep seated our own fears of those who are different from us may have a grip on our own lives that doesn't want to let go. There is a need to be freed.

Thankfully, the Spirit of God has the capacity to bring internal and external liberation. God's liberating power can shake the foundations of a place to break literal and figurative chains. It can challenge economic oppression. It can turn lives around. It can bring peace to those who aren't in peaceful settings. It can bring healing to violent societies. It can bring purpose to those who have lost their way. It's not just freedom that is coming – it is God's freeing Spirit that is coming. From what do you, from what do we need to be freed? God's freeing Spirit is coming, but what do we do as we wait?

Later this week will be the 75th anniversary of the Allied forces invasion of Normandy, an event called D Day, that was perhaps the most significant shift in the Second World War efforts to defeat Nazi Germany. There is a story of Allied troops who were prisoners of war behind German lines when D Day took place. They had managed to obtain various materials out of which they had constructed a crude radio. Away from the prison guards, they would gather around the makeshift radio in secret to try to pick up news from beyond their prison camp. On the night of June 6, 1944, they heard news of the D Day invasion that would eventually liberate Europe. They wondered and hoped that this might be what would lead to their own liberation and the end of the war. But as the sun rose the next morning, they looked out and saw that everything looked just the same in their prison camp. There was the same barbed wire that surrounded them, there were the same hardened faces of the prison guards – there were plenty of stark and ugly reminders that they were not yet free. Nothing seemed to be different, and yet with what they had heard on their rudimentary radio, everything was different. ¹

The liberating Spirit of God is on the way. What do we do in the meantime before we see that freedom out in the world before us? I hope we have the internal freedom that we use to pray and sing hymns to God, whether it is in the middle of the day or at midnight. With an understanding that the liberating Spirit of God is on the way, everything takes on a new light anticipating when the Spirit just might shake things up a bit.

¹Based on a story shared by Rev. Wellford Hobbie.